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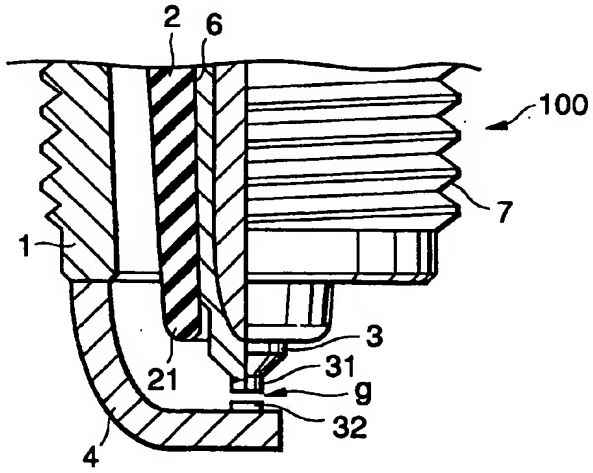
(54) Spark plug

(57) A Spark plug has a central electrode, an insulator provided exterior to the central electrode, a metallic shell provided exterior to the insulator in such a way that the central electrode protrudes from one end, a ground electrode coupled at one end to the metallic shell and which has the other end disposed to face the central electrode, and an igniting portion secured to either the central electrode or the ground electrode or both to form spark discharge gap g. The igniting portions are each composed of a chip made of a metal-oxide composite material that contains at least 10 wt% of Ir, which contains one or more of Rh, Mo, Nb and Pt in a total amount ranging from 0.5 to 89.9 wt% and which also contains a rare earth oxide in an amount ranging from 0.1 to 15 wt%.

FIG.1



EP 0 817 342 A1

Description

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to a spark plug for use in internal combustion engines.

2. Description of the Related Art

Conventional spark plugs for use in internal combustion engines such as automotive engines have the igniting portion formed of a platinum (Pt) alloy chip welded to the tip end of an electrode in order to improve its resistance to spark consumption. However, in view of the high cost of platinum, it has been proposed to use less expensive iridium (Ir) as a chip material.

A problem with the use of Ir as a material to constitute the igniting portion of the spark plug is that Ir is easy to oxidize and evaporate in a high temperature range of 900 to 1,000°C. Therefore, if it is directly used in the igniting portion of the electrode, it is more consumed by oxidation and evaporation than by spark. With a view to retard the oxidation and evaporation of Ir, it has been proposed that a material having a rare earth oxide such as Y_2O_3 dispersed in Ir should be used as the chip material (Unexamined Japanese Patent Publication (kokai) No. Hei. 7-37677). However, as recent models of engine are designed to increase output power, the range of temperatures over which the spark plug is used tends to increase further to the higher end and even the spark plug that uses a chip made of the proposed material can not necessarily be said to have a satisfactory level of endurance.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

An object of the present invention is to provide a spark plug that uses an Ir containing chip material and which is sufficiently resistant to consumption by oxidation and evaporation of the Ir component at elevated temperatures to thereby assure high endurance.

A spark plug comprises, a central electrode; an insulator provided exterior to the central electrode; a metallic shell provided exterior to the insulator in such a way that the central electrode protrudes from one end; a ground electrode coupled at one end to the metallic shell and which has the other end disposed to face the central electrode; and an igniting portion that is secured to either the central electrode or the ground electrode or both for forming a spark discharge gap. The igniting portion comprises a chip comprising metal-oxide composite material containing at least 10 wt% of Ir, at least one selected from the group consisting of Rh, Mo, Nb and Pt in a total amount in the range of 0.5 to 89.9 wt% and a rare earth oxide in an amount ranging from 0.1 to 15 wt%.

The spark plug according to the present invention uses an Ir containing chip material but is sufficiently resistant to consumption by oxidation and evaporation of the Ir component at elevated temperatures to assure high endurance.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

In the accompanying drawings:

Fig. 1 is a partial front sectional view of the spark plug of the invention;
Fig. 2 is a sectional view showing enlarged the essential part of the same spark plug; and
Fig. 3 is a graph showing the relationship between the engine operating time and the volume of chip consumption in the plug under test which used chips of differing compositions.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Detailed description of the present invention will be described as follows.

A spark plug according to the present invention has a central electrode, an insulator provided exterior to said central electrode, a metallic shell provided exterior to said insulator in such a way that the central electrode protrudes from one end, a ground electrode coupled at one end to said metallic shell and which has the other end disposed to face said central electrode, and an igniting portion that is secured to either said central electrode or said ground electrode or both for forming a spark discharge gap. The igniting portion is composed of a chip made of a metal-oxide composite material that contains at least 10 wt% of Ir, which contains one or more of Rh, Mo, Nb and Pt in a total amount in the range of 0.5 to 89.9 wt%, preferably in the range of 0.5 to 20 wt%, more preferably 5 to 10 wt%, and which also contains a rare earth oxide in an amount in the range of 0.1 to 15 wt%.

If a chip made of the material set forth above is used to compose the igniting portion which forms a spark discharge gap, the consumption due to oxidation and evaporation of the Ir component at elevated temperatures is effectively retarded to thereby realize a highly durable spark plug.

Among the composite material of which the chip is to be made, the group of ingredients Rh, Mo, Nb and Pt (which are hereunder referred to as "alloy components") and the rare earth oxide are each effective in retarding the oxidation and evaporation of the Ir component. If the Ir content is less than 10 wt%, the melting point of the chip will drop to such a level that the desired endurance can no longer be assured. Therefore, the sum of the alloy components and the rare earth oxide should not exceed 90 wt%. The Ir content is desirably at least 50 wt%.

If the total content of the alloy components is less

than 0.5 wt%, the desired effectiveness of the addition of those alloy components in preventing the oxidation and evaporation of Ir can no longer be obtained. Therefore, the sum of the alloy components is preferably adjusted to be at least 0.5 wt%.

On the other hand, if the content of the rare earth oxide is less than 0.1 wt%, the desired effectiveness of the addition of that rare earth oxide in preventing the oxidation and evaporation of Ir can no longer be obtained. If the content of the rare earth oxide exceeds 15 wt%, the resistance of the chip to thermal impact decreases to such a level that defects such as cracking may potentially occur on certain occasions such as where the chip is secured to an electrode by welding or the like. While Y_2O_3 is preferably used as the rare earth oxide, other compounds including La_2O_3 and ThO_2 may of course be employed.

The alloy components are desirably contained in amounts not exceeding their solubility limits with respect to Ir. If either one of the alloy components is contained in an amount exceeding its solubility limit with respect to Ir, a brittle intermetallic compound forms between the two elements and this may occasionally impair the endurance of the igniting portion against spark or its resistance to thermal impact. For example, in the case of using Mo or Nb as the alloy component; the solubility limit of Mo with respect to Ir is about 12 wt% at room temperature whereas the solubility limit of Nb with respect to Ir is about 6 wt%, so if Nb or Mo is to be contained individually, their content may desirably be set at a level smaller than the stated values. It should, however, be noted that if the amount in which the intermetallic compound is to be formed is below a certain level and expected to cause only small effects on the durability and other characteristics of the igniting portion, the content of Mo or Nb may safely exceed their solubility limits by a slight degree. From these considerations, the content of Mo, if it is to he contained alone, is preferably 20 wt% or less, more preferably 12 wt% or less. Similarly, the content of Nb, if it is to be contained alone, is preferably 10 wt% or less, more preferably 6 wt% or less. Needless to say, both Mo and Nb may be contained in the composite material and, in that case, the contents of Mo and Nb are desirably set not to exceed their solubility limits with respect to Ir in a ternary system of Ir-Mo-Nb.

Next, in the case of containing Rh as the alloy component, if the Rh content exceeds 80 wt%, the melting point of the composite material will drop to such an extent that the central electrode (or its igniting portion) is reduced its durability. The Rh content is desirably adjusted to lie within the range of 20 to 60 wt%, more desirably within the range of 30 to 40 wt%.

Incidentally, in the case of containing Pt as the alloy component, the Pt content is in the range of 0.5 to 40 wt%, preferably in the range of 2 to 30 wt%.

The composite material for the chip may be a sintered material. Thus has the advantage of forming a uniform dispersion of the rare earth oxide to thereby achieve a further improvement in the durability of the igniting portion.

Several embodiments of the invention will now be described with reference to the accompanying drawings.

Fig. 1 shows an embodiments of the invention, in which a spark plug 100 has a tubular metallic shell 1, an insulator 2 fitted into the metallic shell 1 in such a way that the tip end 21 protrudes from the metallic shell 1, a central electrode 3 provided within the insulator 2 in such a way that the igniting portion 31 formed at the tip end protrudes form the insulator 2, and a ground electrode 4 coupled at one end to the metallic shell 1 as by welding and which has the other end bent laterally such that its lateral side faces the tip end of the central electrode 3. The ground electrode 4 has an igniting portion 32 formed in such a way that it faces the igniting portion 31 of the central electrode 3; the clearance between the igniting portions 31 and 32 forms a spark discharge gap g.

The insulator 2 is a sinter of a ceramic material such as alumina or aluminum nitride as a main constituent, and it has an axial bore 6 through which the central electrode 3 is to be fitted. The metallic shell 1 is a cylindrical shape made of a metal such as a low-carbon steel and which provides a housing for the spark plug 100. The circumference of the shell 1 has a threaded portion 7 formed to assist in the mounting of the spark plug 100 on an engine block (not shown).

The main body 3a of the central electrode 3 and the main body 4a of the ground electrode 4 are both typically made of a Ni alloy. The igniting portion 31 of the central electrode 3 and the opposed igniting portion 32 of the ground electrode 4 are both composed of a chip made of a metal-oxide composite material that contains at least 10 wt% of Ir, which contains one or more of Rh, Mo, Nb and Pt in a total amount ranging form 0.5 to 89.9 wt% and which also contains a rare earth oxide such as Y_2O_3 in an amount ranging from 0.1 to 15 wt%. These chips may be formed from a sintered composite material obtained by providing an alloy powder consisting of Ir and the above-mentioned alloy components or a mixture of the powders of elemental metals in specified proportions, mixing such alloy powder or metal powders with a rare earth oxide powder to form a dispersion, shaping the dispersion into a compact and sintering the compact. Alternatively, the chips may be formed form a molten material obtained by mixing the necessary alloy components and a rare earth oxide powder to give the stated formula and melting the mixture.

As shown in Fig. 2, the main body 3a of the central electrode 3 tapers at the tip end and its tip end face is formed flat. A disk-shaped chip having an alloy formula for the igniting portion 31 is placed on the flat tip end face and laser welding, electron beam welding, resistance welding or other suitable welding technique is applied to the periphery of the joined surfaces to form a

weld line W, whereby the chip is securely fixed to the tip end face of the central electrode 3 to form the igniting portion 31. In order to form the opposed igniting portion 32, a similar chip is placed on the ground electrode 4 in registry with the position of the igniting portion 31 and a weld line W is similarly formed on the periphery of the joined surfaces, whereby the chip is securely fitted to the ground electrode 4 to form the igniting portion 32. If desired, either one of the two opposed igniting portions 31 and 32 may be omitted. In this case, the spark discharge gap is formed between the igniting portion 31 (or the opposed igniting portion 32) and the ground electrode 4 (or the central electrode 3).

The function of the spark plug 100 will be described as follows. The spark plug 100 is fitted on an engine block by means of the treaded portion 7 and used as a source to ignite an air-fuel mixture that is supplied into the combustion chamber. The igniting portion 31 and the opposed igniting portion 32 define the spark discharge gap g; since both igniting portions are composed of chips made of the aforementioned alloy, their consumption due to the oxidation and evaporation of Ir is sufficiently retarded to ensure that the spark discharge gap g will not increase for a prolonged period, thereby extending the life of the spark plug 100.

EXAMPLES

Two Ir based alloy powders were provided, one containing 1 wt% of Mo and the other containing 5 wt% of Rh. Each powder was mixed with a Y_2O_3 powder. The mixtures were shaped into a predetermined shape and sintered to fabricate chips made of metal-oxide composite materials, one consisting of 1 wt% Mo, 1.7 wt% Y_2O_3 and the balance Ir, and the other consisting of 5 wt% Rh, 1.7 wt% Y_2O_3 and the balance Ir. A comparative chip was fabricated from a sintered composite material consisting of 1.7 wt% Y_2O_3 and the balance Ir. Each of the fabricated chips was used to form the igniting portion 31 of the spark plug 100 shown in Fig. 1 and the opposed igniting portion 32 (to provide a spark discharge gap g of 1.1 mm), and the individual plugs were subjected to a performance test under the following condition; a six-cylinder gasoline engine (piston displacement = 2,000 cc) was fitted with the plug under test and operated at full throttle for 200 hours at a rotational speed of 6,000 rpm (with the temperature of the central electrode rising to about 850°C); during the engine operation, the volume of chip consumption was measured at specified time intervals. The results are shown in Fig. 3.

Obviously, the chip of the comparative plug experienced a marked consumption in terms of volume but this was not the case with the plugs within the scope of the invention.

Claims

1. A spark plug comprising:

   a central electrode;
   an insulator provided exterior to said central electrode;
   a metallic shell provided exterior to said insulator in such a way that said central electrode protrudes from one end;
   a ground electrode coupled at one end to said metallic shell and which has the other end disposed to face said central electrode; and
   an igniting portion that is secured to either said central electrode or said ground electrode or both for forming a spark discharge gap;
   wherein said igniting portion comprises a chip comprising metal-oxide composite material containing at least 10 wt% of Ir, an alloy compostion comprising at least one selected from the group consisting of Rh, Mo, Nb and Pt in a total amount in the range of 0.5 to 89.9 wt% and a rare earth oxide in an amount ranging from 0.1 to 15 wt%.

2. The spark plug according to claim 1, wherein the composite material of said chip is made contains said alloy components in amounts not exceeding their solubility limits with respect to Ir.

3. The spark plug according to claim 1, wherein the composite material of said chip is made contains Mo in an amount in the range of 0.5 to 20 wt%.

4. The spark plug according to claim 1, wherein the composite material of said chip is made contains Nb in an amount in the range of 0.5 to 10 wt%.

5. The spark plug according to claim 1, wherein the composite material of said chip is made contains Rh in an amount ranging from 0.5 to 80 wt%.

6. The spark plug according to claim 1, wherein said rare earth oxide is Y_2O_3.

7. The spark plug according to claims 1, wherein the composite material of said chip is made is a sintered material.

8. The spark plug according to claim 1, wherein the amount of Ir is not more than 90 wt%.

9. The spark plug according to claim 1, wherein the amount of Ir is not less than 50 wt%.

10. The spark plug according to claim 3, wherein the amount of Mo is not more than 12 wt%.

11. The spark plug according to claim 4, wherein the amount of Nb is not more than 6 wt%.

12. The spark plug according to claim 5, wherein the amount of Rh is in the range of 20 to 60 wt%.

13. The spark plug according to claim 12, wherein the amount of Rh is in the range of 30 to 40 wt%.

14. The spark plug according to claim 1, wherein the sum of the content of Ir, the alloy composition and the rare earth oxide is not more than 90 wt%.

15. The spark plug according to claim 1, wherein the amount of Pt is in the range of 0.5 to 40 wt%.

16. The spark plug according to claim 15, wherein the amount of Pt is in the range of 2 to 30 wt%.

FIG.1

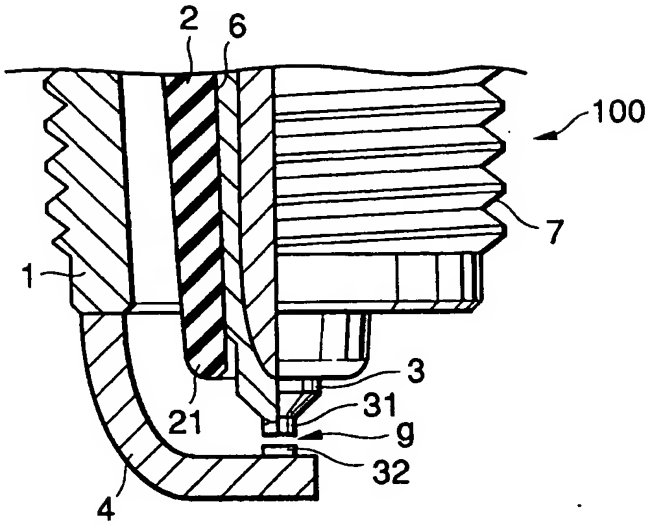


FIG.2

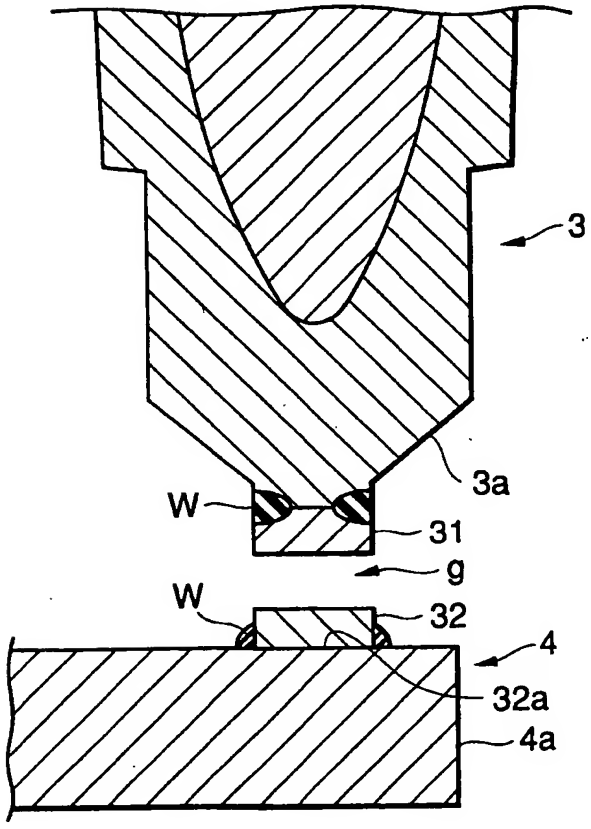
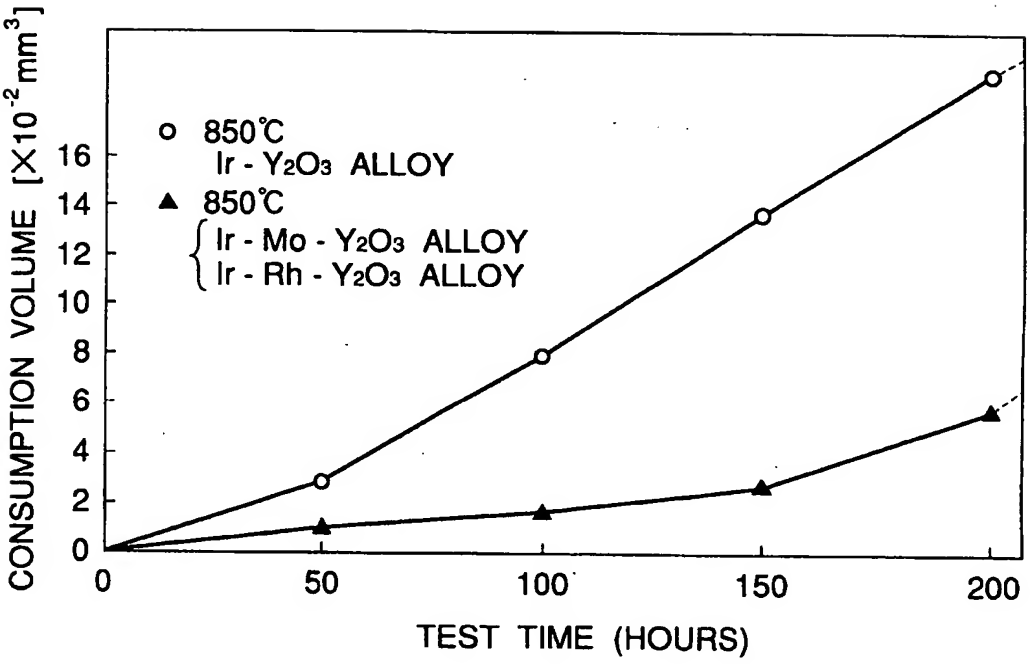


FIG.3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16
0
50
100
150
200
TEST TIME (HOURS)
o 850℃
Ir - Y2O3 ALLOY
▲ 850℃
Ir - Mo - Y2O3 ALLOY
Ir - Rh - Y2O3 ALLOY

European Patent Office

EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

Application Number
EP 97 11 0584

DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category	Citation of document with indication, where appropriate, of relevant passages	Relevant to claim	CLASSIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION (Int.Cl.6)
A D,A	EP 0 635 920 A (NGK SPARK PLUG CO) 25 January 1995 * claims 1-4 * & JP 07 037 677 A	1	H01T13/39
P,X	GB 2 299 813 A (FORD MOTOR CO) 16 October 1996 * claim 1 *	1	
			TECHNICAL FIELDS SEARCHED (Int.Cl.6) H01T

The present search report has been drawn up for all claims

Place of search	Date of completion of the search	Examiner
THE HAGUE	1 October 1997	Bijn, E

CATEGORY OF CITED DOCUMENTS

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